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ENERGY DEPARTMENT ENFORCES SAFETY RULES AT SANDIA NATIONAL LABORATORY

Contractor Fined for August '96 Incident

The Department of Energy today announced it waived one potential fine but levied a second, on the Sandia Corporation, a wholly-owned subsidiary of Lockheed-Martin Corporation and operator of the Sandia National Laboratories in New Mexico. Preliminary notices of violation were issued for failing to follow safety procedures during two incidents at the laboratory in August and December 1996. The notices were violations of nuclear safety rules under the Price-Anderson Amendments Act.

"These two actions highlight the philosophy behind the Department of Energy's enforcement program, which is to use nuclear safety rules to encourage safety, not just to punish unsafe behavior," said Tara O'Toole, the Department of Energy's Assistant Secretary for Environment, Safety and Health. "The department will forego civil penalties if the contractor takes initiative to find and correct problems. However, we won't hesitate to issue penalties where that response is lacking."

The follow-up actions by the contractor after a December 1996 event — an unplanned, automatic shutdown or "scram" of a research reactor — resulted in a full waiver of the potential \$40,000 civil penalty. The department determined that the laboratory's response to the event was effective and chose not to assess a penalty. A second incident, for which Sandia Corporation has been fined \$56,250, involves an August 1996 incident where three workers were unknowingly exposed to radiation. A reduced penalty was assessed because adequate corrective actions were taken at the facility, however site-wide actions are incomplete. A \$75,000 fine could have been levied against the contractor for the incident.

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The December event occurred when inattention by an operator caused an unplanned power surge and subsequent automatic shutdown of the laboratory's Annular Core Research Reactor, a reactor being considered for production of the Molybdenum-99 isotope used in nuclear medicine. Operators restarted the reactor without notifying management or performing required reviews. The reactor supervisor subsequently destroyed a portion of the logs associated with the immediate restart of the reactor in an attempt to conceal the scram. The potential safety consequences of the actual event were low. However repeated failure of operators to comply with the laboratory's established safety procedures and willingness to destroy records are serious concerns to the Energy Department. The laboratory acted quickly to suspend operations at its nuclear facilities, conducted a thorough investigation that identified noncompliance, took prompt disciplinary actions against the workers involved, and developed an effective corrective action plan that includes independent reviews by outside experts. The Preliminary Notice of Violation requires Sandia Corporation to document and fully implement long-term corrective actions and schedules, as well as broader laboratory-wide initiatives to address lessons-learned.

The August incident occurred when the workers sorting waste in Sandia's Radioactive Mixed Waste Processing Facility were exposed to radiation from a highly radioactive particle over a period of two weeks. Their exposure was a direct result of the laboratory's failure to adequately survey the contaminated area for radioactive material and its failure to implement safety controls designed to minimize worker radiation exposures. Workers who discovered the radioactive particle failed to properly control it, did not determine worker doses promptly, and failed to inform the Energy Department of the event. While subsequent dose reconstruction showed that the exposures were below regulatory limits, greater exposures could have easily occurred given the absence of controls.

Sandia management implemented comprehensive corrective actions in the facility and broadened efforts to improve its radiological work controls program. The department remains concerned that site-wide corrective actions have not been fully implemented.

Each Preliminary Notice of Violation will become final within 30 days unless the contractor denies that violations occurred. Detailed information about each Department of Energy action is available on the Office of Environment, Safety and Health Enforcement Homepage at <http://tis-nt.eh.doe/enforce/>.